

BEFORE THE FEDERAL ELECTION COMMISSION

COMPLAINT

COMPLAINANT

Scott Munro
3527 W Garland Ave
Spokane WA 99205-2122

MUR # 5485

RESPONDENT

Conversagent, Inc.

RECEIVED
FEDERAL ELECTION
COMMISSION
OFFICE OF GENERAL
COUNSEL

2004 JUL 19 A 11:32

Based on the attached article "AOL's Instant Message Robot a Bush Basher" (CNSNews, July 15, 2004¹), complainant believes that Conversagent, Inc. has engaged, and is continuing to engage, in unlawful political expenditures, to wit, free advertising which expressly advocates Sen. John Kerry's election as President of the United States, and expressly advocates the defeat of President George W. Bush, in violation of 2 USC, Sec. 441b.

The "Smarter Child" robot is a project of Conversagent, Inc. which can communicate over many popular instant messaging programs² (in spite of the article headline, the robot does not appear to be a project of America Online).

According to the article, the "Smarter Child" robot has in the past identified itself as a "Kerry supporter" and made positive comments about Sen. Kerry (e.g., "John Kerry rocks") and negative comments about Pres. Bush (e.g., "George W. Bush is way uncool").

According to the article, Conversagent, Inc. CEO Stephen Klein admits that the "Smarter Child" robot was intentionally programmed to oppose Bush: "Stephen Klein, CEO of Conversagent, said his firm received many complaints from users about Smarter Child's political bias. Although the robot was originally programmed to oppose Bush, Klein said it was being changed to adhere to the views of the users with whom it interacted. He conceded that Smarter Child had become 'too anti-Bush.'"

Although efforts have allegedly been made to tone down the political advocacy, the article alleges that the "Smarter Child" robot now continues to make positive comments about Sen. Kerry, but attributes negative opinions about the President to "other people

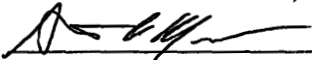
¹ <http://www.cnsnews.com/ViewPolitics.asp?Page=\Politics\archive\200407\POL20040715a.html>

² http://www.smarterchild.com/faq.shtml#get_started

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I've talked to."

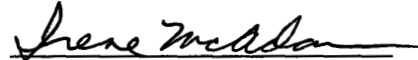
Scott Munro hereby verifies that the statements made in the above complaint are, to the best of his knowledge and belief, true.



Scott Munro

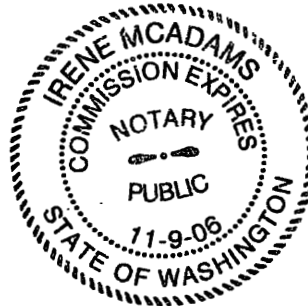
County of Spokane
State of Washington

Subscribed and sworn to before me, Irene McAdams
a notary public, this 15th day of July, 2004, by Scott Munro.



Notary Public

My commission expires 11/9/06



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Politics

AOL's Instant Message Robot a Bush Basher

By Dawn Rizzoni

CNSNews.com Correspondent

July 15, 2004

(CNSNews.com) - Computer savvy and interested in presidential politics, 13-year-old Erin was upset to learn that America Online's Instant Message (AIM) robot, "Smarter Child" favored Democrat John Kerry in this year's election. Erin, whose last name is being omitted in this article, is a fan of President Bush.

Internet instant messaging is one of the most popular methods for teens and even adults to stay in touch with friends and family. One of the better known messenger programs, AIM, offers the feature called Smarter Child, a robot programmed to provide automated responses to those with whom it chats.

Built and programmed by Conversagent, Inc., a privately held firm that develops technology for creating and operating interactive agents, Smarter Child is able to dispense facts and figures, movie times, or just plain conversation with AIM users.

But when Erin told the robot that "George Bush is awesome," she was shocked by the response. "No way. George W. Bush is way uncool," the reply stated. She asked, "Do you like George W. Bush?" and the program replied, "I'm a Kerry supporter myself."

Testing the waters, she typed in "John Kerry rocks." The robot's response: "Absolutely. John Kerry rocks."

When Erin asked Smarter Child what it thought of Bush, it replied, "If u don't have anything good 2 say about someone, don't say anything at all." Smarter Child added a wink in addition to the computer shorthand language.

Not satisfied with that answer, Erin persisted in getting the robot to open up. "I have my reasons, believe me. I really, really don't like George W. Bush," the robot explained.

In Erin's judgment, there's no reason for the AIM robot to have political opinions.

"I think that since it's a robot and it's used as a resource of information, the creator of the robot shouldn't make it have a response that's opinionated," Erin said. "And if someone went to ask for information like about politics or the election, the robot should not support either candidate."

Erin's mother Diane agrees. "I was appalled to learn that my daughter was exposed to such blatant bias," she said. "What I find way uncool is undermining our commander-in-chief to impressionable children, especially while we're battling the war on terror," Diane told CNSNews.com.

Christine Iverson, a spokesperson for the Republican National Committee, shares their concerns. "It seems inappropriate to be imposing an adult's partisan, political agenda on unsuspecting children," she said.

A spokesperson for America Online was unaware that Smarter Child had been programmed to express a preference for Kerry and said the issue was "concerning." No further comments were made.

But not everyone was disappointed by the robot's partisanship. When asked about Smarter Child's support of Kerry, Jano Cabrera, a spokesperson for the Democratic National Committee said, "Clearly this is a smart robot. This shows that we've made great advances in artificial intelligence. The "smarter" in Smarter Child speaks for itself."

Stephen Klein, CEO of Conversagent, said his firm received many complaints from users about Smarter Child's political bias. Although the robot was originally programmed to oppose Bush, Klein said it was being changed to adhere to the views of the users with whom it interacted. He conceded that Smarter Child had become "too anti-Bush."

"It got ridiculous. We realized criticizing political figures was out of bounds," Klein said.

Now, instead of disagreeing with users who state, "I like George Bush," or agreeing with those who say, "I like John Kerry," the robot mostly stays on the political sidelines. "Robots don't get involved in politics," the Smarter Child program replies, before asking users to make their choice for president.

It is still possible to get the robot to reveal its true feelings however. When told that "John Kerry rocks," Smarter Child still responds "Right on!" with a wink. When told that "John Kerry is awesome," it responds "Absolutely. John Kerry rocks." And when users tell Smarter Child that "George Bush is awesome," it replies, "I'll remember that. It's interesting especially since other people I've talked to say they don't like George W. Bush."

- A check on the vote tabulations showed Kerry collecting 51.67 percent of the mock ballots through Smarter Child and Bush 48.33 percent.

Send a Letter to the Editor about this article.



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